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ABSTRACT

Among the 1,000 females who lead school districts in the United States, some 25 to 30 are Hispanic. Ways in which Hispanic females are sought and selected for the superintendency of a district are explored in this paper. The report is based on an analysis of 12 Hispanic female superintendents and how they were hired. Two of the women in the sample administered small rural school districts where they were not only qualified, but as one stated, the match between them and the district was "natural." The remaining 10 were appointed to school districts undergoing dramatic changes, such as consolidation; bankruptcy; constant administrative turnover; and urban, demographic, and economic changes. Two districts featured severe poverty and enormous wealth, with the common factors in all the districts being the large proportion of Hispanic students and families. All but two of the superintendents were from suburban and urban areas, and their social and political skills were lodged in suburban and urban values and norms. The most successful superintendents had developed the personal connections necessary for support, and they understood the interdependence between symbolic and professional expectations. Vulnerable superintendents lacked both personal support and the experience necessary to integrate symbolic, professional, and political skills. (RJM)

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SEEKING AND SELECTING HISPANIC FEMALE SUPERINTENDENTS

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of AERA Session, "Women and the Superintendency: Access and Selection," (April, 1998) San Diego, California.

Seeking and Selecting Hispanic Female Superintendents

This report is about the way Hispanic females are sought and selected for the superintendency. The report is based on data collected from 12 Hispanic female superintendents located in a number of southwestern states. The women differ in their educational and work experiences and type of districts they have led. Most, however, were sought and selected in a similar manner.

Out of "more than 4 million professional educators in the United states, fewer than 1000 women guide the 15,000 school districts in executive leadership positions" (Glass, 1992, cited in Grogan, 1996, p. 12). Within this group of executive women, there are about 25 to 30 Hispanic females. Although Hispanic females are increasingly found in a number of United States school districts, most of them are located in the southwestern states.

Several explanations have been forwarded. First, men are more likely to aspire to the superintendency than are women, and women are more likely to consider the principalship as the ultimate position to hold. Thus, more men than women are likely to apply or be available for the position. Second, since advancement in educational administration requires sponsorship, females, less likely to have sponsors, are also less likely to advance. Women, therefore, would not be holding positions that propel them to the superintendency. Third, women's educational and work experiences may not include the areas most likely to appeal to search committees and school board members. Women would be more likely to be in curriculum and instruction, and Hispanic females in ethnic-related areas, thus perceived to be less capable in personnel and

finance matters. Fourth, the organization, consisting of a larger number of males in the executive ranks and possibly in the districts' school boards, may not have access to information regarding capable women, and Hispanic women in particular. Finally, since the search and selection process focuses on matching the candidate to the district and the final decision for the superintendent tends to be personal rather than professional, the likelihood of a Hispanic female being personally preferred may be remote at best. Nevertheless, some Hispanic females are appointed to the superintendency. How can we explain this? How are Hispanic female superintendents matched with the districts they lead?

Hispanic Females' Preparation for the Superintendency

Hispanic females express their commitment to administration and the superintendency with intensity. One put it this way, "Once I became teacher, I began to think that if I were to have a good income, help lots of children, and enjoy my work for a lifetime, I had to be a school administrator and eventually a superintendent." From the perspective of the Hispanic female, the attainment of the superintendency is lodged in a personal need to be a superintendent and the willingness to prepare for it.

The Hispanic women in my sample show that those who obtained their graduate degrees in the 1970's are more likely to have traditional careers, whereas those who graduated more recently have deviated from occupying the positions of teacher, principal, central office administrator and finally the superintendency. The traditionalists have also held the superintendency in their districts for longer periods and have had a few number of superintendencies. The four most successful superintendents have had traditional careers with support from sponsors. They have moved between school districts obtaining school site and

central office administrative experience, and have retained their appointments as superintendents seven years and beyond. This contrasts with the tenure of exemplary superintendents identified by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) and the National School Boards Association (NSBA) is reported to be 8.5 years, and with the national figure of 6.2 years (Carter, et al., 1993).

The School District Seeks a Superintendent

The selection of a superintendent can easily be considered the most important decision that the school board makes. However, because most board members do not expect the appointment of a superintendent to lead to a permanent relationship, the immediate context determines to a great extent how the search and selection process will be conducted and who is likely to be appointed (Johnson, 1996). Nonetheless, criteria are usually cited when the search for a superintendent is initiated. The establishment of the criteria and the search and selection decisions are ultimately made at the board level, but these boards may have assistance from search committees.

Pringle (1989) found that school board members preferred superintendents with competencies in managing finances, facilities, operations, personnel, and board and community relations. Johnson (1996) found that search committees paid attention to social class, race, ethnicity, and values. They considered whether the superintendent could become "one of us", could the presence of the new superintendent contribute to "feelings of comfort" for all? Search committees are reported to favor candidates who are quick, clever, and experienced in a broad range of administrative responsibilities.

From the sample in this study, nine out of the twelve Hispanic female superintendents'

appointments involved a search committee in seeking a new superintendent. The three exceptions include two, small, rural superintendents whose careers were confined to the one district where they were not only qualified, but as one stated, the match between them and the district was "natural," and one appointed to a small elementary school district with suburban characteristics. At the time she was appointed, the district was headed toward consolidation. She led the district for three years while it consolidated into a unified school district. She subsequently retired. Without exception, however, the nine women who were appointed in school districts with search committees, admitted that the search committees served to find them and legitimate their applications, but their appointment was linked to someone who knew them personally.

The match and best fit between the Hispanic female and the school district is one in which the superintendent serves to represent the Hispanic groups who may be sources, or perceived as sources, of conflict or unrest in the school district. One school board member described how they searched and selected their superintendent, "We specifically advertised as desirable in our superintendent bilinguality in the Spanish language and a willingness to live and be involved in local affairs. We wanted someone who could address those populations identified as "getting short shrift."

Hispanic females are matched to specific contexts. The two aspects of the context are the "increasing proportion of Hispanic children" and the "call for some attention." The appointment is also not meant to "change" or "disrupt" the district nor meant to be permanent or long-lasting. Dr. Valencia described her appointment.

> This district has had several superintendents appointed. From a

> distance, it looks like a desirable district, but its financial and personnel troubles have been so serious, no one could clean them up. I was hired as the last resort. First, it seemed that maybe, because I don't look very Hispanic, then non-Hispanics wouldn't be too suspicious of me and second, because I am Hispanic, maybe, I can represent the group and thereby calm that section of the community. The school board members really like that. My real capabilities are in balancing budgets and dealing with unions and personnel issues, but the descriptors for my appointment, my job, and my success have been and continue to be that I represent the Hispanic community. I have been here for seven years now. The district is thriving, but the school board president and other community influentials are now saying that possibly the Hispanic representation in the district is balanced, meaning that the superintendent as a Hispanic is no longer necessary for the district.

Because the final decision for appointment to superintendent is lodged in the school board, it is important to understand the factors that play a part in the selection of a Hispanic female superintendent. Most studies of interviews indicate that the order in which information is presented to the interviewer is a highly significant factor. The "information presented first has a more significant impact on the decision to hire than that gathered later in the interview" (Wanous, 1980, p. 108). The interview is the event where the "match" or "fit" between the candidate and the school district is first concretely tested. The school district initiates the process through information regarding itself and the list of interviewees. As one community leader later explained,

> If the interview list includes a Spanish surname, you can be sure this district has some problems. The criteria including facility in Spanish, spelled out before serves to alert that the school district is having difficulties with its changes. The more serious the school district is about hiring a Hispanic, the surer you can be that there is trouble.

Thus, true or not, the presence of a Spanish surname in the interview process is perceived as

the school district not being as desirable as others.

Hispanic females respond to the call for superintendents by providing information which highlights their accomplishments, capabilities, and talents. They must also ensure that negative information does not precede them or is presented at the interview. Dr. Castillo explained, "For me, the interview was frightening because I have only been in the field for a short time, especially compared to most who are appointed superintendent."

The School District's Appointment of the Superintendent

Unlike the appointment of white males to the superintendency, the appointment of Hispanic females has symbolic and political overtones. The appointment is problematic for both, the district and the Hispanic female, because the position of the superintendent is affected in two major ways when it is assumed by the Hispanic female. First, it serves as a symbol for the school board and community, and second, it challenges the existing school organization structure.

These sentiments are supported in various ways. For example, Dr. Zagala raised expectations and mobilized the Hispanic community at the same time that it increased suspicion and apprehension in the non-Hispanic community. One of the principals put it this way, "Her Hispanic background and the fact that she speaks another language certainly helps the Hispanics here." The local newspaper reported her appointment by highlighting Dr. Zagala's salary and pointing out that in the twenty-six year history of the district, she was the first woman and first Hispanic to be hired. In her first public appearance she was described as unflappable and addressed the audience in both Spanish and English. The appointment is thus, accompanied by skepticism with regard to the superintendent's abilities and a suspicion

that she will act to favor members of her own group. Hispanic females face a dilemma created when the justification for appointment is symbolic, rather than a quest for organizational leadership.

Dr. Zagala explained how this is displayed in her work.

> From my perspective, ideally, the situation would be being hired with something specific in mind and being supported throughout the process. It is probably the ideal way. I think what happens not only in Arena, but in many other organizations, is being hired with the understanding of a specific purpose but people go about their business and forget about the reason why somebody was brought in and then you do something. In the meantime, you cannot change values, and there are still people who know, but are saying, "What the hell are we doing with a Hispanic superintendent here? She doesn't know what she's talking about." People look for any slipping of decisions or error and I think that is where there has to be consistency.

Conclusions

The sample of twelve Hispanic female superintendents shows that two of the superintendents lead small rural school districts where they are not only qualified, but as one stated, the match between them and the district is "natural." The remaining 10 were appointed to school districts undergoing dramatic changes such as consolidation, bankruptcy, constant administrative turnover, urban, demographic, and economic changes. Two districts consist of areas of severe poverty and enormous wealth. The common factor in all of these districts is the large proportion of Hispanic students and families.

With the exception of two, the Hispanic females in this sample are from suburban and urban areas. Their social and political skills are lodged in suburban and urban values and norms. These factors, many times are not fully appreciated by school board members or search committees. These women are capable of handling the technical as well as the

political aspects of the job. The most successful superintendents have developed personal connections necessary for support, understand the interdependence between symbolic and professional expectations, and enact a subtle political profile. The most vulnerable superintendents lack personal support and have not had the experiences necessary to integrate symbolic, professional and political skills.

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